

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA, THE CASE OF BIHAR

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This thesis counters dominant academic and policy discourses of low internal migration in India. Drawing on long-term empirical data in a source region, the thesis finds evidence of high and increasing mobility from the eastern Indian state of Bihar in the period 1998 – 2011. This rise in the incidence of migration from rural Bihar is accompanied by a change in its determinants. Over time, individual factors have become more important in explaining migration. At the same time, there is evidence of increased propensity to migrate among the agricultural labouring class. The thesis suggests that these changing determinants of migration from rural Bihar may be understood as a response to rising labour demand in distant urban markets elsewhere in India.

The thesis finds that increasing migration has been accompanied by a change in the pattern of income in rural areas between 1999 and 2011. Remittances have become very important, particularly for those in the bottom income quintiles. The local non-farm sector also emerges important, but income from this sector remains concentrated in the upper income quintiles. Overall, there has been a decline in agriculture in the context of the growth of the rural non-farm sector, and the thesis provides evidence of this decoupling of agriculture from the ‘rural’.

These aforementioned changes have occurred in a context where migration continues to be male-dominated and circular. Most migrants eventually return to the village to retire, and permanent migration, of the kind that entails relocation of the entire household from the village to the city is very limited. Thus, in the context of this research, migration emerges as a source area household livelihood strategy, and the empirical complexity of migration in the thesis does not support dual sector migration and development models that suggest a linear transition of labour from rural to urban areas.

The thesis presents evidence of income enhancing effects of migration. Using household panel data, it finds that households that move from non-migration to migration (migration to non-migration) experience large and significant income gains (losses). Yet, based on research at destination, the thesis finds that many migrants do not desire to migrate to work in urban labour markets. However, they ‘choose’ to do so in order to sustain rural material conditions that are structurally dependent on urban remittances. It finds that while young migrants are active agents in their own migration, they are also subject to vulnerabilities and exploitation. The thesis highlights that the subjective experiences of young migrants and views of their family members of their migration are different from perspectives of the market and state on the *same* migration.

The thesis speaks to diverse literatures, and ideas and debates in migration and development. Methodologically, the thesis combines quantitative and qualitative techniques in development research and finds both a convergence and divergence in results from different methods. This has implications for both research and policy. In particular, economic discourses may overstate the importance of income in migrant welfare and thus negate migrant experiences and subjectivities – a critical component of well-being. The thesis thus makes a case for the incorporation of migrant subjectivities and emotions for a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of rural-urban migration in academic and policy discourses.